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# Acquittals likely in papal shooting

By Andrew Borowiec
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NEWS ANALYSIS

ROME — The trial of what has become known as the "Bulgarian Connection" in the 1981 shooting of Pope John Paul II appears heading for acquittal due to insufficient evidence.

The prosecution will sum up its case against three Bulgarians and three Turks after a recess that ends Feb. 4. Diplomatic observers say it is so thin it will never result in indictments.

The Italians have relied almost entirely on the testimony of Turkish gunman Mehmet Ali Agca, who is serving a life sentence for the shooting of the pontiff. In court he was erratic, often bordering on apparent madness.

The case was further obscured by a concerted Bulgarian effort to discredit the indictment as politically motivated by the West.

To most Western diplomats here, the aftermath of the pope's shooting on May 13, 1981, in Rome's Saint Peter's Square was stage-managed by the "Fifth Directorate" of the Soviet KGB dealing mainly with disinformation.

Soviet interest in the Pope's death was obvious to many: He had helped galvanize the defiant Poles around the subsequently banned Solidarity labor movement. With John Paul II ensconsed in the Vatican, religion in Poland received an enormous boost as an act of political opposition.

Two of the three Bulgarians on trial claimed diplomatic immunity and are safe in Sofia. The third, Sergei Antonov — under house arrest since 1982 due to poor health — testified in a robot-like manner, leaving no strong impression and giving nothing away.

Agca changed his testimony radically several times. At first he claimed he acted alone, then spoke of his recruitment by Bulgaria, a Soviet client state in the Balkans and said to be one of the main conduits for guns and drugs used to destabilize the Western world.

Recently, Agca simply refused to cooperate with the prosecution, thus virtually destroying its case.

Reliable sources said that coded messages had been delivered to Agca in his prison and that he was allowed contact with various visitors. The authorities claim they have no knowledge of this.

There is also a book, "La Fililere" (The Connection) written by French lawyer Christian Roulette that claims the "Bulgarian Connection" is a myth concocted by the Central Intelligence Agency with the Italian security services.

Mr. Roulette's own testimony in Rome was pathetic: He was unable to confirm a single allegation nor prove the existence of "secret documents" about the alleged CIA involvement.

The trial, which opened last May, was marked by two key elements:

- No light has been shed on Agca's presence in Bulgaria, where he reportedly was recruited to shoot the Polish-born pope.
- Agca's testimony — according to credible sources — was clearly manipulated from outside to shatter the prosecution's case.

Bulgarian counter-arguments are based on the claim that Agca was a "madman," that he had no common language with the Bulgarians he was alleged to have worked with, and, finally, that he was not a "socialist" but a fugitive member of a banned Turkish right-wing extremist organization, the "Grey Wolf Commandos."

Some observers felt that Agca's alleged "madness" was carefully controlled if not staged.

The Italian investigating magistrates have traveled to Bulgaria, West Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Turkey in search of evidence. But nothing conclusive has been gathered.

Thus, what the Italian press has dubbed as "The Trial of the Century" because of its potential impact on East-West relations, appears to be a legal and political fiasco.

The case was further obscured by the mysterious death in a Turkish jail last summer of Turkish citizen Bekir Celenk. Once described as a key figure in the plot to kill the pope, Celenk stayed under house arrest in Bulgaria until last July, when he was suddenly handed over to the Turkish authorities.

He admitted, before a Turkish tribunal, participating in gun-running and dope smuggling under the apparent auspices of the Bulgarian trading company, Kintex, regarded as a branch of Bulgaria's intelligence service. But Turkey refused to extradite him to Italy.

Another mysterious figure is held in a New York jail awaiting extradition to Italy on charges of espionage. He is Francesco Pazienza, once an agent of the Italian secret service SISMI, who claims to have information about the plot to kill the pope.

The court rejected a demand by prosecutor Antonio Marini to question Pazienza. Equally, the court disallowed a request for further psychiatric examination of Agca, who was declared fit to stand trial after on interview with a psychiatrist in 1981.

Agca's outbursts — including the claim that he was "Jesus Christ" — helped enormously the Bulgarian efforts to discredit the case. Bulgaria's concern was obvious from the beginning. An intricate propaganda machine was set in motion to deny any complicity in the plot.

The Bulgarians did everything to portray Western intelligence services — particularly the CIA — as the "real culprit."

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